



Jacqueline Saper's "From Miniskirt to Hijab" is a story for our times

By Teme Ring

As Jacqueline Saper shopped for a gift for her husband on a sunny Tehran boulevard in 1979, she had no idea that she was about to witness history. The young Iranian wife had already lived through events that seemed to shift the earth on its axis. In her lifetime, Jacqueline had endured hardships that few can imagine. But also joys and privileges that Americans would find surprisingly familiar.

On that beautiful November day, Jacqueline stood in front of the window of a high-end boutique. She contemplated whether her husband would enjoy a new wallet or perhaps a cologne. Her reverie was broken by a group gathering nearby. Like a storm cloud, the crowd swelled and became ominous. They chanted "Death to America!" Jacqueline now had a more consequential decision to make. Find shelter in a store, get a closer look at the demonstration, or get home fast. She chose the latter. That evening she learned that she had been present at the takeover of the American Embassy.

A few years earlier, this dangerous scenario would have been unimaginable. Jacqueline grew up in Tehran with great good fortune. But her life was destined for seismic change as suggested by the title of her gripping memoir: *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran*.

Jacqueline's parents had met in the late 1940s at a social dance in England held for the University of Birmingham students. Her father, Rahmat, was an international student in the chemical engineering department. Her mother, Stella, was pursuing a degree in journalism. At the end of the school term, her father returned to his homeland. For two years, Rahmat and Stella exchanged love letters and photographs by post. Finally, the couple was married in Tehran. The fact that Jacqueline's parents had chosen each other added to the rarity of their courtship. At that time, most marriages in Iran were arranged.

Jacqueline's father was a prominent Iranian scientist and university professor. Her English mother was a self-made career woman who had a prominent position at the airport. The family lived in a diverse, affluent neighborhood.

The future looked bright.

That is just the beginning of Jacqueline's unique journey. As she explains, "There are a lot of memoirs about Iran. Why is my book different? First, I'm Jewish. The Jewish community was one-third of one percent of the population. Although small in size, it was vibrant and productive. Because Iran is an Islamic nation, after the revolution, as a minority, I had a different experience that the majority did not have. Second, I'm bi-cultural, which was unheard of in the Iranian Jewish community. Third, I experienced Iran in its three distinctive eras. A teenager in the monarchy, an adult during the revolution, and a wife and mother in the Islamic Republic."

And what an era it was. In 1978, after a visit to family in the U.K., Jacqueline flew home to Iran as it descended into pandemonium. When she landed at Mehrabad Airport, she found soldiers barking orders. It was a taste of things to come. The Jewish people have lived in Iran for almost three thousand years. But at the start of the revolution, most of the community fled to Israel and the United States. For reasons that Jacqueline describes in the book, her family stayed.

Jacqueline's life became a series of heart-pounding experiences. There was happiness – at eighteen, she married a physician and would give birth to a son and daughter. But there were also tense high-wire scenarios that make the book one of the best thrillers I have ever read.

As the government tightened restrictions, Jacqueline could not pursue higher education. The morality police accosted her for not covering her hair. Her husband was called to the Iran-Iraq border to provide medical help in a brutal war. She had to give birth and raise young children in the most harrowing circumstances. At that point, Jewish families were restricted from leaving the country.

Jacqueline's memoir is a masterpiece for all time and especially for our times. She is a witness to events that would change her family's destiny and world history. Her story is a testament to grit, perseverance, and, ultimately, victory amidst catastrophe. The last part of the book reveals how she and her husband devised a way to escape Iran. Reading this is the stuff of legend and human ingenuity at its best.

Jacqueline, who now makes her home in Chicago, kindly spoke with me by phone. We discussed a few details about her extraordinary life.

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Teme: How would you describe your life before the revolution?

Jacqueline: I grew up in pre-revolutionary Iran when it had a king. It was very secular, a country that was very much like America. As my book title says, I wore miniskirts and dressed in the latest fashion. I listened to American music and watched American television. It was a culture that idolized the West, especially America. My name is Jacqueline because Jacqueline Kennedy was the first lady of the United States when I was born. Although Iranians have their own beautiful culture, my name was a source of pride.

Life was very good. There was an emphasis on the rich Persian history of the country. Unlike many Middle Eastern countries, Iran has been around for two and a half thousand years. Our history books were very thick!

Because of my unique background, I grew up bilingual and sensitive to other people. I was insightful and observed others. I could easily switch from one culture to the other. Many immigrants who come to America have to learn the new culture and language. I was already ahead of that.

Because my mom was a career woman, we had live-in maids who were like my second mothers. These women became part of our family. They came from a sector of Iranian society that later supported the revolution. Through them, I learned a lot of about Islamic traditions which helped me survive in the Islamic republic.

THE GOVERNMENT CRACKS DOWN

Theme: After the Revolution, how did your life change as a woman?

Jacqueline: The hijab became a compulsory covering for women. Not one strand of your hair could be shown. You could only show up to your wrist of your hands and the brow of your face. I was always scared and self-conscious that the front of my head would show. You could only wear colors that were black, navy, gray, or brown.

Women in Iran are now fighting for their rights. They still have to wear a hijab, but it's now colorful colors, and the front of the hair can show. They wear makeup and nail polish. This was not the case when I was there. There were morality police. In the book, I write about a confrontation I had with one of them, and it was pretty serious. Hijab is just a piece of fabric. But for me, it was a sign of repressive laws in favor of men, including marriage, divorce, and child custody.

Teme: What is influencing the government to loosen restrictions? Has the internet played a part?

Jacqueline: Yes. The internet is slow or sometimes censored in Iran. But people still understand what's happening outside the country and yearn for democracy. There's satellite television programming from America and Europe on YouTube. They see how the other part of the world lives. They see how other women not only in the West but in other Islamic countries live. In Iran, women cannot sing in public. Women cannot dance in public. Women cannot ride a bike. Men and women want to have parties without fear of being arrested. Alcoholic drinks are banned, but Iran has an alcoholic problem. As I describe in my book in a chapter titled, "Private Life/Public Life," these restrictions cause people to live contradictory lives.

SURVIVAL

Teme: After the Revolution, you endured many traumas before you were able to leave. How did those experiences impact your life?

Jacqueline: The experiences have not traumatized me, but instead, they have strengthened me. I now have more compassion for other repressed people whose rights have been taken away. The theme of my book is survival. I don't allow things to weigh me down. I learn, I grow stronger and move on.

IRAN IS MORE THAN WHAT THE NEWS TELLS US

Teme: What do you want people to know about Iran and its people?

Jacqueline: Iran is not only what we hear in the news with angry Ayatollahs and "Death to America" chants. Iran has two and a half thousand years of history and is much more than that. Iran is a big country, even by international standards. With a population of eighty-three million we cannot generalize them as one. Over half of Iranians are Persian. But there are also many other ethnicities such as Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis, and Lors. People from each region, such as the north or the south, observe their distinct customs.

Persian culture, believe it or not, is hospitable. Iran also has a lot of good things like delicious cuisine and beautiful poetry. Iranians like America and are familiar with American culture. Many people in Iran are not happy with the current regime. What we see in the news is the minority of Iranians.

Iranians are intelligent people, and the country has a high brain drain. Many of its smartest talents are leaving the country for better opportunities. Iranian-Americans are among the most successful immigrant groups in the United States. They have thrived in politics, business, science, and medicine.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN CULTURES

Theme: When you arrived in the United States, did you encounter discrimination?

Jacqueline: Some people are too quick to judge others. Once I was at a grocery store, and the woman next to me asked, "Where are you from?" I said, "Iran." She was afraid and moved away from me. She thought I was a terrorist. I often say I'm from Iran and people say, "Are you Sunni or Shia?" I say, "There are other religious minorities in Iran who have lived there for many centuries. They're so surprised to hear this fact. Other times, I've been asked, "Why is your name Jacqueline? When did you change your name?" I say, "No, my name was always Jacqueline." Or they ask, "How come you speak such good English?"

I've seen some Iranians who come to America say, "I don't want to have anything to do with that part of the world." But one should not alienate herself from her identity. I'm proud of my heritage. Actually, since my father's passing in 2014, I have become even more interested in my Persian roots.

On the other hand, I've lived in the States for almost thirty-three years, and I'm very American. I love America, which is my country now. I have a unique point of view because I am two people in one body. I can look at the Iran situation from an American point of view. But I can also look

at America from an Iranian point of view. I have appeared as an analyst on television and radio shows discussing the Middle East.

Teme: You have the gift and the ability to connect people.

Jacqueline: Yes. Since childhood, I have always felt I was a bridge between cultures. My hobby was to take books and translate them from one language to the other. I volunteer as a translator and interpreter for the National Immigrant Justice Center. I work with supervising attorneys on behalf of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers. It's so important to translate correctly. If you simply translate word by word, the meaning can come out differently. You have to understand the culture to convey it to a person from another culture properly.

BUILDING A NEW LIFE

Teme: When you arrived in the United States, you were a young mother and a new immigrant. What was your path to becoming an award-winning student, business professional, and author?

Jacqueline: I do not allow hurdles of life to pull me down. We left all our property and belongings behind in Iran. We had to start from zero. I pursued my education when my two children were young. Sometimes I worked three jobs at the same time and studied at night. I did everything I could. My husband had to study and pass many exams to regain his position as a physician in the United States. He was rarely around, But I persevered and didn't give up.

In America, I was grateful for the many opportunities that I could pursue. Because my home country denied me an education, denied my rights as a woman. But in America welcomed me, so I had to do something and contribute as well. My daughter is a lawyer. My son is a doctor. What they have accomplished here they could not have accomplished in Iran. Seeing my kids learning and having an opportunity was more important than all the stuff I left behind in Iran.

Teme: As I was reading your book, I saw parallels between what you lived through and the upheaval and uncertainty we're enduring in these times. What is the key to getting through?

Jacqueline: A lot of things are out of our control. You have to do the best that you can. You have to have a positive attitude, persevere, and deal with the situation.

ADVICE FOR AUTHORS

Teme: What is your advice to aspiring authors?

Jacqueline: Writing a book is a full-time job, and it requires a lot of commitment. You have to know your subject matter very well, and do extensive research. It's doable, but like everything else, it needs a lot of dedication and passion. Many times, I wanted to give up. I said, "What have I put myself into?"

Teme: Tell us about the publishing process?

Jacqueline: The publishing world is competitive. But I believed in my book. My material was not only a memoir but also a critical historical account. People need to know what happened in Iran to understand what's happening in the world today.

I'm proud that my publisher, Potomac Books of The University of Nebraska Press. The press is one of the largest and diversified university presses in the country. The manuscript went through a rigorous review. An Iranian scholar was also hired to verify the dates, locations, and events mentioned in the book. The book, published in October 2019, will soon be available as an audiobook. The book is available in the United States and many other countries.

FROM MINISKIRT TO HIJAB: A GIRL IN REVOLUTIONARY IRAN has had received much praise and rave reviews. The book is a finalist for the 2020 Clara Johnson Award for Women's Literature. Foreword Reviews' named it the "Diversity Book of the Week," and Curated Magazine suggested it as the Must-Read Book of Fall 2019.

Teme: Anything else that you would like to add?

Jacqueline: I'm excited about the Israeli TV series called "Tehran." The show is an espionage thriller that showcases Iranian and Israeli cultures. On the surface, Israel and Iran don't have a good relation. Iran is the number one sworn enemy of Israel. But in reality, both nations share a long history of peaceful coexistence. The path to coexistence and peace is to respect and understand each other.

From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran by Jacqueline Saper is available everywhere books are sold. Please consider a purchase from your local independent bookstore. More about Jacqueline at <https://www.jacquelinesaper.com/>.